



Home > Publications > Corrections > Research summaries > Research summary: Sexually abusive juveniles

Sexually abusive juveniles

Research summary

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Question

Are sexually abusive juveniles different from adult sex offenders?

Background

The seriousness of sexual offending and its long-term consequences has led to a substantial increase in the number of treatment programs that address sexual aggression, particularly for juveniles. Although much is known about adult sexual offenders, less progress has been made in identifying risk and need factors of sexually abusive youth. As a result, many treatment programs and related services for sexually abusive juveniles have been based on our knowledge of adult sexual offender treatment assuming that sexually abusive juveniles are simply "younger" adult sexual offenders. However, these "adult driven" approaches may not be the most appropriate as they may ignore significant differences between adult and juvenile sexual offenders.

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Method

Fifteen different treatment programs across Canada gathered data on 137 male sexually abusive juveniles. The youth, with an average age of 16, were assessed at intake, halfway through treatment, and again at completion of treatment on a range of factors, including the sexual offence (e.g., number of victims and victim age), sexuality (e.g., sexual behaviour history, sexual fantasies), delinquency (e.g., criminal history, risk for re-offending, antisocial attitudes, and peers), family make-up and functioning, and general psychosocial functioning (e.g., anxiety and depression). The youth and his parents completed various self-report questionnaires. The youth's primary therapist also provided information on the offender and treatment. On average, youth were engaged in treatment for a period of 18 months. Statistical analyses examined the effects of maturation and development on the needs of sexually abusive youth and the impact of treatment to facilitate pro-social changes.

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Answer

Results indicated that sexually abusive juveniles are different from adult sexual offenders on at least three critical factors.

First, there are significant maturational changes during the teenage years that impact on many areas of the youth's functioning. Aging was related to positive changes in psychosocial and psychosexual development suggesting that during adolescence, youth are beginning to incorporate societal norms and standards more into their personality and behaviour.

Second, most juveniles, unlike adult sexual offenders, do not demonstrate a clear pattern of deviant sexual interest, as evidenced by the number of victims, victim characteristics, and specific arousal to deviant sexual behaviour (e.g., rape or sex with young children). The majority of juveniles had sexually offended against only one victim and typically the victim was related to the youth. For juveniles who offended against two or more victims, 40% of them had offended against both genders. In addition, the youth reported significantly more sexual fantasies that are non-deviant than deviant, and their fantasies more often involved age-appropriate partners (as opposed to children under 12).

Finally, family factors are critical in the development of sexually abusive youth. High stress family environments, poor parental supervision, and parental rejection were predominant in the profiles of sexually abusive juveniles, suggesting that these family factors are important treatment targets.

Policy implications:

1. Treatment and supervision practices of juvenile sexual offenders need to be attentive to the developmental changes occurring during adolescence, including but not limited to, sexual and social maturation.
2. Sexually abusive juveniles are different from their adult counterparts in that deviant sexual interests in youth are relatively infrequent.
3. Family functioning appears to play an important role in the emergence of sexually aggressive behaviour. For this reason, it is important that specialized services target family functioning.

Source

- Bourgon, G., Morton-Bourgon, K.E., & Madrigano, G. (2005). Multisite investigation of treatment for sexually abusive juveniles. In B.K. Schwartz (Ed.), *The Sex Offender: Issues in Assessment, Treatment, and Supervision of Adult and Juvenile Populations: Volume V*. (pp 15-1 – 15-17). Kingston, NJ: Civic Research Institute.

For further information

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